INTERCULTURAL INTERACTION
AND THE ROLE OF SENSE-MAKING

Prof. Terry Mughan
Greg O’Shea

Anglia Ruskin University, UK
Intercultural Interactions and the Role of Sense-making

- Why ‘Sense-making’ and ‘making sense’ in organisations?
- Intercultural Interaction and the need to ‘make sense’
- Sense-making events and the sense-making process
- Critical Incident activities and the sense-making process
- ‘Well-meaning clashes’ and Activities
Why ‘Sense-making’ and ‘Making Sense’ in Organisations?

Internal Context
- What ‘local’ interactions have made sense to me
- Impact of my own socialisation experiences
- Searching for meaning in ‘Mismatches’ (Brislin)

Analyse interactions

External Context
- Global Interactions
- Immigration Patterns
- Global Markets

Derive meaning

Interpret and make sense

Individuals increasing need to make sense of intercultural interaction

Make sense and act
Sense-making (Weick)

Properties

- Grounded in self-identity
- Retrospective
- Social
- Ongoing
- Driven by reflection on ‘what happened’, ‘what worked before’
- Action on ‘what did it mean’, ‘what should I do now’

Substance

- Cognitive maps
- Creation of patterns in a sea of complexity and contradiction
- Creation of shared views of the world/corporation/region/country/team
- Words are the building material of sense
  - Stories and Metaphors
  - Theories and frameworks
  - Experiences and mismatches
  - Reflection and discourse
Sense-making is an active process, whereby, in making sense of the world, actors in turn impose their beliefs upon that world, constructing it as opposed to passively interpreting it.

Interplay of interaction and interpretation during the experience of ongoing, unpredictable, intercultural events.

Coherence ➔ Action
What is good sense-making?

What are the practicalities of making and giving sense?

Failed sense-making or absence of it?

How often can we hear “it doesn’t make sense”?

What did it mean and what did you do?
Iterative Process

Mismatch
‘It doesn’t make sense’

Think carefully about influence of my socialisation

Identify cultural influences on my behaviour, my reaction

Analyse critical incident/mismatch my reaction, my influences

Make sense of mismatch – plan for future
Activities: ‘Well-Meaning Clashes’

- Activities can use ‘well-meaning clashes’.
- Persons who possess good interaction competences in their own culture experience ‘bumpy’ intercultural interaction.
- Critical incident short stories can convey the context and the misunderstanding.
- Learners identify the cultural differences in perception that caused the clash.
- Learners encouraged to develop multiple perspectives.
- Perspective-taking as a skill becomes critical to success in intercultural interaction.
We are all sense-makers.

In intercultural interaction, sometimes sense is a ‘nonsense’ - ‘A way of seeing is a way of not seeing’.

Increasing need to be good at making sense of intercultural interactions in organisations. Sense-making is iterative and messy and is critical to success in global organisations.

Understanding our own cultural socialisation helps our sense-making – what shapes our world view.

Mismatches provoke deeper sense-making.

Activities can create critical incident mismatches that provoke this deeper sense-making in a safe environment.
Activity: ‘Holding Meetings’

RATIONALE:
As the trend for workteams to grow into self-management gathers momentum, there is a need for a greater understanding of the demands, needs and techniques of meetings. An added complication arises when team members are drawn from different national cultures and are used to different meeting practices. Unfortunately, newly formed teams and newly appointed team leaders may have little sense of how to run efficient meetings and how to exploit diversity in their work group. The activity helps to identify the common practices of meetings and the ways to make them more efficient and comfortable for a diverse set of meeting participants.

LEARNING OUTCOMES:
Participants become aware of the roles played in the meetings and various meeting styles. They also learn possible improvements for running a meeting, including activating quiet members, increasing participants’ commitment to the results, efficient use of equipment, etc. The learners also find out the benefit of ground rules for a meeting.
Activity: ‘Holding Meetings’

- As an example of ‘well-meaning clashes’ we set an activity in a meeting inside an organisation.
- The activity generates clashes between different participants as they act out roles in the meeting.
- The initial meeting is observed (viz Ethnography chapter and skills) – participants then reflect on the causes for clashes and on their own socialised organisational programming with regard to meetings – what is ‘normal’ for me and why.
- A series of ‘ground rules’ are developed to improve the conduct of the meeting so that clashes are avoided.
Activity: ‘Holding Meetings’

- The meeting is practiced a second time and the participants reflect again on how they could personally review their interactions and make sense and to help make sense for others in the conduct of such intercultural meetings in the future.

- Additional clashes can be generated to highlight different socio-cultural norms.

- Meeting case studies can be reviewed and reflected upon in order to encourage the participants to share their perspectives on what has happened in the meeting.

- Simple clashes could be engineered around time, space, place, context, gender roles, hierarchy roles.
Activity: ‘BMW-Rover Case Study’

RATIONALE:

The purpose of this activity is to enable students to test their sense-making abilities on a company case.

LEARNING OUTCOMES:

The participants learn to apply earlier learning to an integrated case illustrating intercultural behaviour within a complex organisational and management situation. The relationship between personal, organisational and national perspectives will be assessed. The role of concepts such as communication styles, power relationships and personal mobility will be assessed as elements in a complex professional situation. The participants learn to absorb, analyse and synthesise information, to test hypotheses and to balance sets of opposing data.
Activity: ‘BMW-Rover Case Study’

Views of BMW and Rover employees expressed during their exchange programmes or in daily relations with their foreign partners. (All the quotations that follow were uttered in English)

British Apprentice
i) “The German apprentices don’t have as much fun as we do. We like taking the Mickey out of each other but they are too serious.”
ii) “We tried to follow the talk but it was all in German. I understood a couple of words like ‘franchising’ but that was all.”

German Engineer

“The British are flexible, that’s true. We Germans look for rules. If we don’t find any, we make some. But now we are working together and that is good. Yes, the British are beginning to become a little German and vice versa.”
Activity: ‘BMW-Rover Case Study’

- Organisational histories (biographies)
- Internal/external factors
- Role of governments
- Industry pressures
- Employees as actors/victims
Activity: ‘BMW-Rover Case Study’

- Data-rich
- Public-domain or commercially protected? Reliability?
- Levels of insight and their interdependence
  - Industry/nation/organisation/individuals
- What sense can be made of it? A single explanation?
Contact Details:

Prof. Terry Mughan
Centre for International Business Research and Development
Ashcroft International Business School
Anglia Ruskin University

e-mail: t.mughan@anglia.ac.uk
Leonardo da Vinci
Competências linguísticas

Programme

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